

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2009

Interview With Justin Webb of BBC World News

June 1, 2009

President's Visit to Egypt/Relations With Muslim Nations

Mr. Webb. Mr. President, thank you very much for talking to the BBC.

The President. Thank you, sir. Thank you very much for having me.

Mr. Webb. It's really good to be here. Let's turn straight to your big speech, a hugely important speech you're making in Cairo on Thursday. Many Muslims think they're owed an apology, actually, for the Bush years and the sins that, in their view, were committed by the United States during those years. Is this speech in any way an apology?

The President. No, I think what we want to do is open a dialog. And, you know, there are misapprehensions about the West on the part of the Muslim world, and, obviously, there are some big misapprehensions about the Muslim world when it comes to those of us in the West. And it is my firm belief that no one speech is going to solve every problem; there are no silver bullets. There are very real policy issues that have to be worked through that are difficult, and, ultimately, it's going to be action and not words that determine the path of progress from here on out. But it did seem to me that this was an opportunity for us to get both sides to listen to each other a little bit more and hopefully learn something about different cultures.

Relations With Muslim Nations

Mr. Webb. You say, "both sides," so I take from that that Muslims listening to this speech you are hoping will also be changed by it and their attitude to the United States perhaps change. What needs to change on the behalf of those you're actually speaking to?

The President. Well, I mean, look, let's just take one small example: The U.S. Muslim population is more numerous than the populations of many majority-Muslim countries. So, you know, we have a huge and thriving Muslim American community. We have Muslim Americans represented or who are serving in Congress. We've got a President who's got family members who are Muslim.

So this notion that somehow America is detached, is removed, sees some clash of civilizations as inevitable, I think a lot of the propaganda and dogma that's churned out there is inaccurate.

Now, the flip side is, is that in the wake of 9/11—what is also true is that in a whole host of our actions, and sometimes in our words, America has not been as careful to distinguish our very real need to hunt down extremists who would do us harm—something that's necessitated by our self-defense—and broader policy differences or cultural differences that exist that are best approached through diplomacy and conversation and some self-reflection on our part. And so that's the kind of back and forth that I think is going to need to take place.

And the last point I made, because I should actually correct myself, when I said "both sides," there are actually many sides to this, because one of the misapprehensions about—misperceptions about the Muslim community is that it's somehow monolithic. And, you know, setting aside differences between Shi'a and Sunni, the Muslim country that I lived in when I was a child, Indonesia, obviously, is very different from Pakistan, is very different from Saudi

Arabia. And so we have to also recognize that there are going to be differences based on national identity and not just faith.

President's Visit to Egypt/Freedom Agenda

Mr. Webb. You're making this speech in Cairo. Amnesty International says there are thousands of political prisoners in Egypt. How do you address that issue?

The President. Well, look, obviously, in the Middle East, across a wide range of types of governments, there are some human rights issues. I don't think there's any dispute about that. The message I hope to deliver is that democracy, rule of law, freedom of speech, freedom of religion, those are not simply principles of the West to be hoisted on these countries, but rather what I believe to be universal principles that they can embrace and affirm as part of their national identity.

Now, the danger I think is when the United States or any country thinks that we can simply impose these values on another country with a different history and a different culture. Our job is——

Mr. Webb. But you can encourage——

The President. Absolutely we can encourage, and I expect we will be encouraging——

Mr. Webb. But you will.

The President. And I think the thing that we can do most importantly is serve as a good role model. And that's why, for example, closing Guantanamo, from my perspective, as difficult as it is, is important, because part of what we want to affirm to the world is that these are values that are important even when it's hard, maybe especially when it's hard, and not just when it's easy.

President Mohamed Hosni Mubarak of Egypt

Mr. Webb. Do you regard President Mubarak as an authoritarian ruler?

The President. No, I tend not to use labels for folks. I haven't met him; I've spoken to him on the phone. He has been a stalwart ally, in many respects, to the United States. He has sustained peace with Israel, which is a very difficult thing to do in that region, but he has never resorted to unnecessary demagoguing of the issue and has tried to maintain that relationship.

So I think he has been a force for stability and good in the region. Obviously, there has been——there have been criticisms of the manner in which politics operates in Egypt, and, as I said before, you know, the United States job is not to lecture but to encourage, to lift up what we consider to be the values that, ultimately, will work not just for our country but for the aspirations of a lot of people.

U.S. Foreign Policy/Middle East Peace Process

Mr. Webb. A lot of people are looking for specifics in your speech, and one of the areas they're going to be fascinated by, hanging on your every word, is Israel and the Palestinians and what you say about that. You've made it very clear in recent weeks to the Israeli Government that you want settlement building to be frozen in existing settlements. They've made it equally clear that they're not going to do that. So what happens now?

The President. Well, it's still early in the conversation. I've had one meeting with Prime Minister Netanyahu. I think that we have not seen a set of potential gestures from other Arab States or from the Palestinians that might deal with some Israeli concerns. I do believe that if

you follow the roadmap approach that has been laid out, if Israel abides by its obligations that includes no settlements, if the Palestinians abide by their obligations to deal with the security situation, to eliminate incitement, if all the surrounding Arab States, working with the Quartet, are able to encourage economic development and political development, then I think that we can actually make some progress.

So, you know, one of the things that in the 24/7 news cycle is very difficult to encourage is patience, and diplomacy is always a matter of a long, hard slog. It's never a matter of quick results.

Middle East Peace Process

Mr. Webb. I'll accept that, but you have the Israeli—a senior member of the Israeli cabinet, the Transport Minister saying, "I want to say in a crystal-clear manner [that] the current Israeli Government will not accept in any fashion that legal settlement activity be frozen." I mean, you've got a job of work, can I at least put it like that?

The President. Always have a lot of work, yes. I mean, nobody thought this was going to be easy. If it was easy, it would have been done. But I do think that we're going to be able to get serious negotiations back on track, and we're going to do everything we can because not only is it in the interests of the Palestinian people to have a state, it's in the interests of the Israeli people to stabilize the situation there, and it's in the interests of the United States that we've got two states living side by side in peace and security.

Israel-U.S. Relations/U.S. Foreign Policy

Mr. Webb. What George Bush senior did to concentrate the minds of the then-Israeli Government was freeze loan guarantees to Israel. Is there—I don't want to ask you about specifics, because, obviously, you don't want to say at this stage, but are there potentially sanctions, if I could put it like that, that you could employ, that you would consider employing against Israel if this Israeli Government doesn't do what you want it to do?

The President. I think that I've said my piece on this matter. We're going to continue negotiations. We think that it's early in the process, but we think we can make some progress.

Iran

Mr. Webb. What the Israelis say is that they have managed to persuade you at least to concentrate on Iran and to give what's—behind the scenes they're calling a bit of an ultimatum to the Iranians, that by the end of this year there must be some real progress.

The President. Well, the only thing I'd correct on that is I don't think the Israelis needed to convince me of that, since I've been talking about it for the last 2 years. What I have said is that it is in the world's interests for Iran to set aside ambitions for a nuclear weapon, but that the best way to accomplish that is through tough, direct diplomacy.

Now—and what I was very clear about was that although I don't want to put artificial time tables on that process, we do want to make sure that by the end of this year we've actually seen a serious process move forward, and I think that we can measure whether or not the Iranians are serious.

My personal view is that the Islamic state of Iran has the potential to be a extraordinarily powerful and prosperous country. They are more likely to achieve that in the absence of nuclear weapons that could trigger a nuclear arms race in the region, not just responses from Israel, by the way, but potentially other states in the region—and that if what's preventing

them from seeing that reality is 30 years of loggerheads between Iran and the United States, then this may be an opportunity for us to open the door and see if they walk through.

Now, there's no guarantees that they respond in a constructive way. That's part of what we need to test.

Iran/Nuclear Nonproliferation

Mr. Webb. A couple of former members of the National Security Council actually suggest that you should go further, though, and that Iran should be regarded in the same way as Japan, that, in other words, nuclear reprocessing should be accepted and monitored by the international community. Is that remotely possible?

The President. I think that the key right now is to initiate a process that is meaningful, that is rigorous between not only the United States and Iran bilaterally but also continuing with the P5-plus-one discussions in a way that's constructive. What I—without going into specifics, what I do believe is that Iran has legitimate energy concerns, legitimate aspirations. On the other hand, the international community has a very real interest in preventing a nuclear arms race in the region. Now, one——

Mr. Webb. But could Iran have the right to reprocess energy?

The President. One point that I want to make is that in my speech in Prague, I talked about how we need to reinvigorate a much broader agenda for nuclear nonproliferation, including the United States and Russia drawing down our stockpiles in very significant ways.

To the extent that Iran feels that they are treated differently than everybody else that makes them embattled. To the extent that we're having a broader conversation about how all countries have an interest in containing and reducing over time the nuclear proliferation threat, that I think has to be part and parcel of our broader agenda.

Europe-U.S. Relations/U.S. Foreign Policy/National Security

Mr. Webb. You're going on to Europe, to Normandy, scene of a great ally coming together. Have you convinced European leaders, do you think, taking a sort of broad look at Europe as a whole, that it is necessary sometimes to use force to get your way in the world? And I'm thinking, obviously, particularly of Afghanistan, but almost in a wider sense, a kind of Venus and Mars issue. Are the Europeans going to be more onboard now to the American way of thinking?

The President. Well, look, I think any student of European history understands that the devastation of not just two World Wars but centuries of war across the Continent and across the Channel means that Europeans understand better than anybody the costs of war, and it is legitimate and understandable that they are hesitant. I think the United States has a similar attitude, that we should be thinking in terms of our national defense, not where can we initiate war.

We had an attack against the United States that killed 3,000 Americans. There have been multiple terrorist attacks planned, and some successfully executed, against European states. And at some point, we have to make sure that we are eliminating those networks that would——could do our citizens harm. That is our first job as a state, as a Government, and——

Mr. Webb. And European leaders are onboard for that?

The President. And I think that they are onboard on that. Now, there are going to be tactical issues and strategies, and the politics of this can sometimes be difficult. Listen, the idea of U.S. troops in Afghanistan 7 years after 9/11—or 8 years after 9/11 is hardly popular. At some point, we have to make the case that it is necessary, and I think that, you know, what we tried to do with our strategic review was to give a broader framework of not just military but also diplomatic and development initiatives that would move in tandem with the military. And that framework, I think, is one that was heartily embraced by European leaders, by NATO. Now we've just got to execute, and execution is always tough, especially in a world recession where people are looking at their budgets.

President's Leisure

Mr. Webb. We're almost out of time, Mr. President. I wanted to finish by asking you just sort of a personal question. We've been through all these issues, and they must weigh on your mind constantly. How do you relax? What do you read? What do you—what does President Obama do?

The President. Well, nothing is better at pulling you out of your world than having a couple of children. So I've got a 10-year-old and a 7-year-old, and they're planning pool parties and talking about homework and trying to figure out how to get the dog back on the leash and——

Mr. Webb. And family life works in this way.

The President. And it really does. I mean, one of the huge benefits of being President is I now have this nice home office, and I go upstairs and I can have dinner with my family just about every night, and they can travel with me when they're able. And so we've got, I think, a very good deal, and I'm grateful that I've got such a wonderful wife and kids. That's my main form of relaxation.

Now, the—if I can get in a basketball game, or a round of golf, or I pick up a novel every once in a while, that doesn't hurt.

Mr. Webb. Are you reading anything at the moment?

The President. You know, I'm reading a book called "Netherland" by Joseph O'Neill—almost finished, excellent novel.

Mr. Webb. We'll let you get back to it. I'm sure you have other things to do before you go.

The President. Thank you so much.

Mr. Webb. Thank you very much, Mr. President.

The President. Appreciate it. Thank you.

NOTE: The interview was taped at 3:34 p.m. in the Library at the White House. In his remarks, the President referred to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel. Mr. Webb referred to Minister of Transportation and Road Safety Yisrael Katz of Israel; and former National Security Council staff members Flynt Leverett and Hillary Mann Leverett. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on June 2.

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